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A reply to Walter Cronkite

By William C. Westmoreland

The following article by General Westmoreland, USA (Ret.), refers to an address by former CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, which was excerpted on this page May 11.

Strangely, I seem to be on CBS's hit list. First I am attacked by Mike Wallace on CBS Reports in January and now by Walter Cronkite in his recent address to the National Association of Broadcasters in Dallas. If fairness is a part of the American system, I ask to be heard.

Mr. Cronkite stated that I told a college audience in Colorado that the news media will have to be censored in any future war involving the United States. I made no such statement to the college audience I addressed in Colorado. I consented to a press conference before that speech at which I responded to reporters' questions about the Vietnam war. In answer to one question, I said that the big lesson we should learn from Vietnam is that this country cannot pursue a war unless the American people are in overwhelming support. I pointed out that during the Vietnam conflict the media played a role in turning public sentiment against the war with numbers of inaccurate and sensationalized stories. I noted that some journalists had their eyes on winning a Pulitzer prize and sensationalized their stories with that end in view.

Walter Cronkite ought to understand that point very well, since his network, CBS, did much to paint our Vietnam war effort in negative terms.

I told the few reporters at the press conference in Colorado that Vietnam was the first war we had fought with no censorship, and I said: "Without censorship (in war), things can get terribly confused in the public mind, and when you add that to another first for Vietnam — television — you have an instrument that can paralyze this country, absolutely paralyze it to where the president is unable to do what he thinks is in the national interest."

Actually, I said that I doubted that it would be possible to impose censorship again in time of war, but I added, "When we put men's lives on the line . . . it seems to me to be a time when the devil's advocate role (of the media) should be softened."

President Reagan recently said that if the press had behaved in World War II the way it has been covering the conflicts we have been engaged in over the last 20 years, we would have had a revolution. I am not sure that I agree with that. I think it is more likely that the media would have succeeded in so demoralizing the American people that our success in defeating Hitler would have been far more difficult, if possible at all.

Cronkite's address to the hundreds of broadcasters itself demonstrated the damage that can be done by irresponsible reporting. He discussed the CBS television program that charged that I had been responsible for concealing vital intelligence information from the American people, Congress, and perhaps even the White House during the Vietnam war.

Note that 14 years later, Mr. Cronkite was still describing Tet as a defeat for our side, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. That is inexcusable. Equally inexcusable was the foul and misinformed charge made by CBS that



I and my staff had put an arbitrary ceiling on enemy strength estimates to make our performance look better.

Prof. Walt W. Rostow said in a letter to the New York Times about the program: "The conclusion is false; and those who produced the documentary know it is false." One reason they knew it was false was because CBS conducted a three-hour taped interview with Professor Rostow, who was special assistant to President Johnson during the Vietnam war, in which he demolished the charges that they intended to air on their program. Not one word of the Rostow interview was aired. The same was true of an interview with George Carver, who was a senior CIA official who had been deeply involved in discussions about order of battle estimates back in 1967. Dr. Carver also told CBS they were way off base. Again, nothing that a former senior official said was used in the program.

Daniel O. Graham, who had been on my intelligence staff as a lieutenant colonel and who later became director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, agreed to be interviewed for the documentary on one condition. He extracted the promise that CBS would air his statement making the factual point that the Tet offensive had demonstrated, if anything, that our intelligence estimates had overstated the military strength of the Viet Cong. That promise was not kept.

All of this and more was brought out at a two-hour news conference three days after the CBS attack on me. CBS did not tell its audience of the detailed refutation of its charges that was made at that news conference by Ambassador Bunker, Dr. Carver, General Graham, my former intelligence chief, Lt. Phillip Davidson, and several other officers as well as myself. Perhaps that is why Walter Cronkite, speaking on the subject over two months later, was apparently totally ignorant of the fact that the charges made on the CBS program had been exposed as false.